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2. USSR: ALONG THE SOVIET-AFGHAN BORDER

Despite its current efforts, Moscow will not be able to seal the Soviet-Afghan border anytime soon. Rugged terrain, cross-border ethnic ties, and existing settlement patterns make that virtually impossible. But by beefing up border defenses at a few key points and pursuing a policy of defense in depth on both sides of the frontier, Moscow will reduce mujahidin opportunities and limit the military significance of any future cross-border raids.

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Soviet overreaction. Soviet leaders as well as the Soviet population were clearly shocked by two recent small cross-border raids by the mujahidin. They should not have been—the Soviet-Afghan frontier contains a plethora of trails known to the local population and has always been extremely porous. The possibilities for crossing in both directions are many.

Borders vs. boundaries. But if the boundary itself is permeable, the border zone is not. Nearly impassable mountainous terrain effectively blocks the eastern third. Further, there are no major population centers within 50 km of the border—only two Soviet cities in this zone number over 50,000, and only one, Termez, is a major communications hub. There are only a handful of easily defendable roads and rail lines leading away from the border.

The same pattern holds for cultural and ethnic ties. Although the people on both sides are Muslims, they are Muslims of very different types, and those on the Soviet side have usually looked down on the Afghans. Even the three major ethnic groups that straddle the border—Turkmens, Uzbeks, and Tajiks—are divided by tribal membership, political loyalty, and vastly different standards of living. And in only a few places (see map) do similar linguistic communities in fact face each other.

Probable defenses. All this significantly reduces the Soviet problem. In a few places, Moscow is likely to increase the number of border guards. Elsewhere, the Soviets are likely to try to restrict passage by conducting a defense in depth, tightening political control on their side, and conducting punitive raids against the population on the Afghan side.

These steps will not close the border, but future mujahidin attacks will have little direct military impact on the Soviets. And because of the nearly certain Soviet punitive response, such raids may prove counterproductive for the mujahidin.

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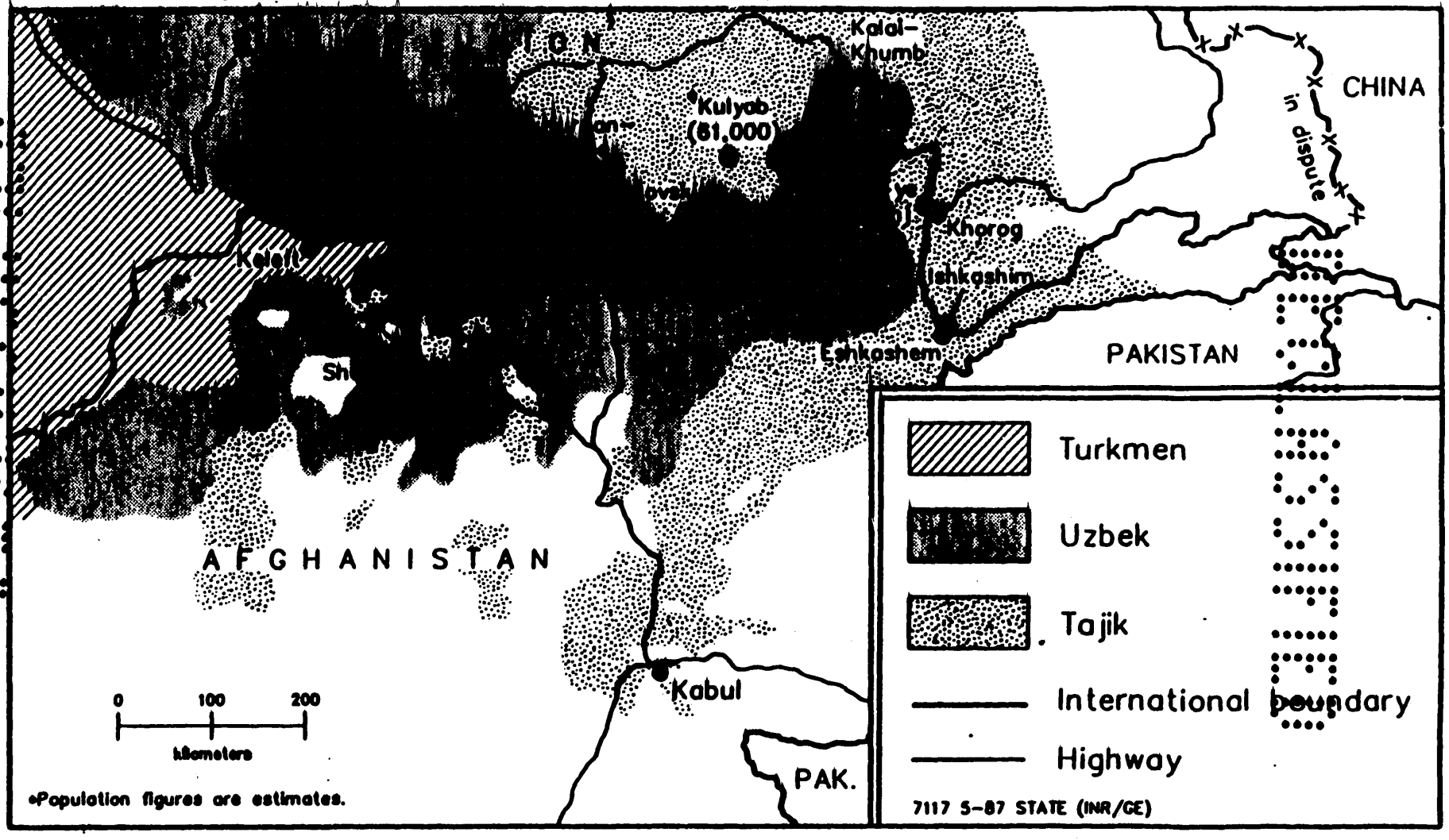
Ethnic Groups along the USSR–Afghanistan Border